

# WANDERERS BACK ON TOP — BUT IT'S A STRUGGLE!

By **STUART EARP** Clapton 2, Wycombe Wanderers 3

THREE more points at the Spotted Dog ground on Saturday may have put Wycombe Wanderers on top of the Rothmans Isthmian League Division One for the first time since October 2, but they were forced to fight all the way for their victory by a much improved Clapton outfit.

And Wanderers won't occupy the premier position for long if they repeat the inconsistent form shown on Saturday. Clapton's lowly league position may be something of a false picture, but man for man, the Blues possessed far more ability and there was no excuse for the narrowness of the margin.

Probably the deciding factor of this game was the attitudes of the teams before they took the field. Wycombe, with two large victories against poor sides behind them, were not going to be motivated easily by the standards of the opposition. Clapton, on the other hand, needed no lifting whatsoever. And that was how the game transpired.

Clapton ran for everything and with no mean skill were level 2-2 at half time before finally succumbing to a superb goal by Tony Horseman. But just where did Wanderers come unstuck?

For a start, their play was far too patchy, brilliant at times and rank bad at others. There were problems at the back where keeper Kevin Raine seemed to have little understanding with his defence while Keith Mead was also below par. Luckily for Wycombe, Dave Bullock turned in a solid display.

In the middle of the park, young Graham Mackenzie was overpowered and it took a good deal of skill from Larry Pritchard and man of the match Terry Reardon to get Wycombe into top gear. Up front Steve Perrin was full of confidence and a constant threat but Horseman was quiet overall and Dylan

Evans had a game he'll want to forget. Poor Evans could hardly put a foot right and wasted too many potentially promising attacks.

Wanderers can also claim they were out of luck on several occasions. They hit the woodwork, had a seemingly good goal by Pritchard disallowed and forced 11 corners to Clapton's two.

Clapton's enthusiasm was in evidence early on when Stan Spicer put in a great run down the flank and brought Raine into action after only two minutes.

Wycombe's first reply came six minutes later. Evans' cross was cleared as far as Pritchard was directed it back into the box. Horseman got his head to the ball and diverted it into Reardon's path at the far post, but Terry's header squirted just wide.

It was a much simpler move that brought the opening goal — surprisingly to Clapton. The break was so simple, in fact, that it caught Wycombe completely unawares. Stan Spicer lofted through a brilliant 40 yard ball for Dave Emanuel to chase.

With him was Mead but the centre back delayed his tackle and with Raine coming out in a bid to halt the danger, Emanuel coolly flicked the ball over his head and into the net. Mead dashed back to try and repair the damage but the ball had just enough pace to bounce into the net.

Despite Clapton's example, Wanderers still banked on their own intricate and elaborate brand of football. Too often, however, the passing broke down and Clapton were able to hustle away the danger. The Blues finishing too, left a lot to be desired in the early stages.

Emanuel had the ball in the net again after 18 minutes but was ruled off side and after that, Wycombe began to get a grip. Now the moves began to pay off with Reardon supplying some

truly brilliant touches in mid-field. After 23 minutes they pulled back to 1-1 thanks to a mistake in the home defence.

Pritchard cleverly lofted a cross into the Clapton box but as keeper Tony Halford went up he was hindered by Kevin McCarthy and the ball fell conveniently to Steve Perrin, who nodded his fifth goal in three games into the net.

Perrin then really began to show just why he has been selected for the England squad

this season. Firstly he drove in a low shot which Halford saved well and then in the 31st minute, he was on hand to hook home the second goal. Keith Mead headed through from the edge of the box following a corner and Perrin had seemingly all the time in the world to volley home a fine goal.

The visitors continued to dominate the exchanges and seemed to be going into the changing rooms with a 2-1 lead.

Then, just 60 seconds before half time, Clapton's endeavour earned them an equaliser. Grant lofted Emanuel near the by-line. Ron Spicer arched over the free kick and as the Wycombe defence failed to clear, McCarthy prodded the ball home with Raine glued to his line.

Wycombe just had time for one quick raid and were unlucky not to go ahead again. Pritchard sprinted past three defenders with superb control and cracked a great shot past Halford but referee Barker disallowed the effort on the linesman's advice. Presumably he thought the Wycombe skipper had handled.

Halford saved well from Horseman's "bent" free kick soon after the interval but for the first ten minutes of the second period, Clapton looked the more likely side to score with the Spicer brothers accurate passing causing the Blues defence some concern.

In the 58th minute Mick Halford replaced Mackenzie, who has recently been selected to play for England Schools against Scotland. Mick's first touch of the ball won him a corner, and it was somewhat surprising to see Pritchard taking the flag kicks, thereby diminishing Wanderers' attacking potential inside the penalty area.

After 63 minutes, Bullock flashed one of Pritchard's corners just too high after a 15 yard dash to the near post and as the ball progressed Wycombe once again established their authority. Horseman began to make his presence felt, like in the 21st minute when he sent a clever overhead kick just wide.

Five minutes later, "Bodger" put Wycombe where they belonged — in front. The ball was bouncing loose just inside the area and Horseman let fly with that lethal right foot and sent it crashing into the roof of the net. Halford couldn't have seen it.

The goal came at just the right time and saved Wanderers from an anxious last quarter. From then on, they produced more fine football. Perrin missed the chance of a hat-trick by missing Pritchard's cross and then Horseman nodded over the top.

Clapton were obviously feeling the effects of their non stop running as Wycombe began to find more and more space inside the penalty area. With three minutes remaining, fortune deserted Wanderers again when Horseman twanged the crossbar from a narrow angle after Perrin had threaded through a fine header.

Once again Perrin had escaped the clutches of the experienced Ken Pope. I have a feeling other centre halves will find him more than a handful this season. But Wycombe will need to raise their game if they are to clinch the title in their last season as amateurs.

**CLAPTON:** A. Halford, K. McCarthy, R. Lowry, K. Pope, J. Constable, R. Spicer, S. Spicer, A. Taylor, A. Sorenson, V. Scarle, D. Emanuel, sub. J. Sellick (not used).

**WYCOMBE:** K. Raine, P. Wood, K. Mead, D. Bullock, R. Grant, G. Mackenzie (sub. Reardon 65 min.), Reardon, I. Pritchard, A. Horseman, S. Perrin, D. Evans.

**Referee:** J. Barker (Doddingtonhurst).

**Half time:** 2-2. Goalscorers: Wycombe — Perrin (23, 31), Horseman (71), Clapton — Emanuel (12), McCarthy (44).

## Remaining fixtures

HOME

ROTHMANS ISTHMIAN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE

| Wycombe   | 27 | 20 | 4  | 3  | 76 | 23  | 64 |
|-----------|----|----|----|----|----|-----|----|
| Dulwich   | 32 | 17 | 11 | 4  | 53 | 25  | 62 |
| Hendon    | 25 | 18 | 5  | 2  | 47 | 10  | 59 |
| Ley stone | 30 | 17 | 7  | 6  | 46 | 22  | 58 |
| Bishop s  | 29 | 16 | 8  | 5  | 57 | 19  | 58 |
| Hayes     | 30 | 15 | 8  | 7  | 56 | 32  | 53 |
| Oxford    | 33 | 12 | 13 | 8  | 35 | 38  | 48 |
| L'head    | 26 | 15 | 3  | 8  | 54 | 27  | 48 |
| Tooting   | 36 | 13 | 8  | 15 | 46 | 49  | 47 |
| Ufford    | 29 | 11 | 8  | 10 | 38 | 34  | 41 |
| Kings     | 30 | 10 | 11 | 11 | 37 | 34  | 41 |
| Sutton    | 29 | 10 | 11 | 8  | 37 | 36  | 41 |
| Hitchin   | 26 | 11 | 7  | 8  | 48 | 38  | 40 |
| Barking   | 33 | 11 | 6  | 18 | 42 | 52  | 39 |
| Enfield   | 30 | 10 | 7  | 13 | 38 | 37  | 40 |
| W'stow    | 32 | 8  | 10 | 14 | 34 | 49  | 34 |
| Watson    | 20 | 9  | 5  | 6  | 32 | 24  | 32 |
| Woking    | 18 | 10 | 1  | 7  | 31 | 30  | 31 |
| Bromley   | 34 | 7  | 8  | 19 | 34 | 58  | 29 |
| Clapton   | 35 | 5  | 3  | 27 | 24 | 113 | 18 |
| St Albans | 33 | 3  | 4  | 26 | 26 | 78  | 13 |

AWAY

OUT of their 15 remaining league matches Wycombe Wanderers have seven at home. Three are against clubs in the top half of the table. Those still to visit Loakes Park, where the Blues are unbeaten this term, are Hendon (their strongest challengers), Leytonstone, Ilford (Amateur Cup semi-finalists), Hitchin, Sutton United, Walthamstow Avenue and Walton and Hersham.